

## Chapter three

# Elements of iconic design

Anyone can design a logo, but not everyone can design the right logo. A successful design may meet the goals set in your design brief, but a truly enviable iconic design will also be simple, relevant, enduring, distinctive, memorable, and adaptable.

So many requirements may seem like a tall order, and it is. But remember, you have to know the rules in any creative endeavor before you can successfully break them. A Michelin-star chef doesn't just pluck ingredients from thin air. She takes a tried-and-tested recipe and adapts it to create her signature dish. This also applies to creating brand identities. The basic elements of classic iconic brand identities are the ingredients in our recipe, so let's examine each one closely before you go out and earn your own awards.

### **Keep it simple**

The simplest solution is often the most effective. Why? Because a simple logo helps meet most of the other requirements of iconic design.

Simplicity helps a design be more versatile. Adopting a minimalist approach enables your logo to be used across a wide range of media, such as on business cards, billboards, pin badges, or even a small website favicon.

Simplicity also makes your design easier to recognize, so it stands a greater chance of achieving a timeless, enduring quality. Think of the logos of large corporations like Mitsubishi, Samsung, FedEx, BBC, and so on. Their logos are simple, and they're easier to recognize because of it.

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**FedEx**

By Lindon Leader

1994



And simplicity helps people remember your design. Consider how our minds work, and how it's much easier to remember a single detail, such as Mona Lisa's smile, than it is to remember five: the clothes Mona Lisa wears, how her hands are placed, the colour of her eyes, what sits behind her, the artist (Leonardo da Vinci—but that one you did know, didn't you?). Look at it this way: If someone asked you to sketch the McDonald's logo, and then sketch the Mona Lisa, which would be more accurate?

Let's look at a different example.

The National Health Service (NHS) logo is one of the most visible logos in the United Kingdom, so much so that its use as the emblem of British health care was made government policy in 2000.

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**National Health  
Service (NHS)**

By Moon Brand

Designer:  
Richard Moon

1990



Initially designed in 1990 by Moon Brand, this logo includes a simple, clean color palette and type treatment. The fact that the design has remained unchanged for nearly 20 years is a testament to its success.

“We kept the design deliberately simple for three reasons: to make it easy to implement, to last as long as possible, and to go undetected by the British media who often see such identity programs as an extravagant use of public funds,” said Richard Moon, director at Moon Brand. “By the NHS’ own reckoning, the branding program has saved tens of millions in pounds by employing this distinctive, easy-to-use brand program.”

## Make it relevant

Any logo you design must be appropriate for the business it identifies. Are you designing for a lawyer? Then you need to ditch the fun approach. Are you designing for a winter-holiday TV program? No beach balls please. How about a cancer organization? A smiley face clearly won't work. I could go on, but you get the picture.

Your design must be relevant to the industry, your client, and the audience to which you're catering. Getting up to speed on all these aspects requires a lot of indepth research, but the investment of time is worth it: Without a strong knowledge of your client's world, you can't hope to create a design that successfully differentiates your client's business from its closest competitors.

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**Hawaiian Airlines**

By Lindon Leader

1993



Keep in mind, though, that a logo doesn't have to go so far as to literally reveal what a company does. Think about the BMW logo, for instance. It isn't a car. And the Hawaiian Airlines logo isn't an airplane. But both stand out from the competition and are relevant within their respective worlds.

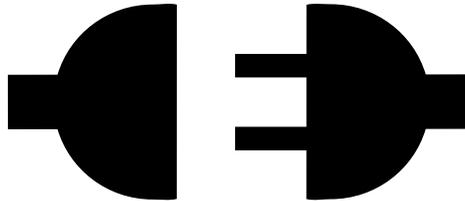
Josiah Jost of Siah Design, based in Alberta, Canada, worked with Ed's Electric, a local electrical company, to create a new brand identity. Not only did Josiah deliver a logo that is relevant, but he also created one that most viewers won't easily forget.

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**Ed's Electric**

By Josiah Jost

2008



**ED'S ELECTRIC**

“With Ed's Electric, the logo idea popped into my head while I was trying to see something in the negative space in electrical elements,” said Jost. “I knew right away that the concept was a winner.”

Another Moon Brand design, this time for Vision Capital, epitomizes this notion of relevance as it pertains to brand identity. During extensive discussions with the client prior to commencing any creative work, Moon Brand designers discovered that Vision Capital is about more than just capital: It's also about raising funds for investors using a very strategic approach to buying company portfolios. So they decided to base their exploration on this "more than" idea.

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**Vision Capital**

By Moon Brand

Designer:  
Richard Moon

1990



The resulting logo conveys the concept in a clever way. By rotating the "V" for vision, it becomes the "greater than" symbol, allowing viewers to easily interpret the logo as signifying "greater (or more) than capital," while still clearly featuring the initials of the company.

Just because you're designing a logo that must relate to the stereotypically dull financial markets doesn't mean it can't be dynamic and full of meaning.

## Incorporate tradition

When it comes to logo design and brand identity, it's best to leave trends to the fashion industry. Trends come and go like the wind and the last thing you want to do is invest a significant amount of your time and your client's money in a design that will become dated almost overnight. Longevity is key, and a logo should last for the duration of the business it represents. It might get refined after some time to add a little freshness, but the underlying idea should remain intact.

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### Vanderbilt University

By Malcolm Gear  
Designers

2002



VANDERBILT  
UNIVERSITY

The Rhode-Island-based agency Malcolm Gear Designers created the visual identity for Vanderbilt by integrating two symbols long associated with the university: the oak leaf (strength and steadfastness) and the acorn (seed of knowledge). These elements also reflect the school's status as an active arboretum.

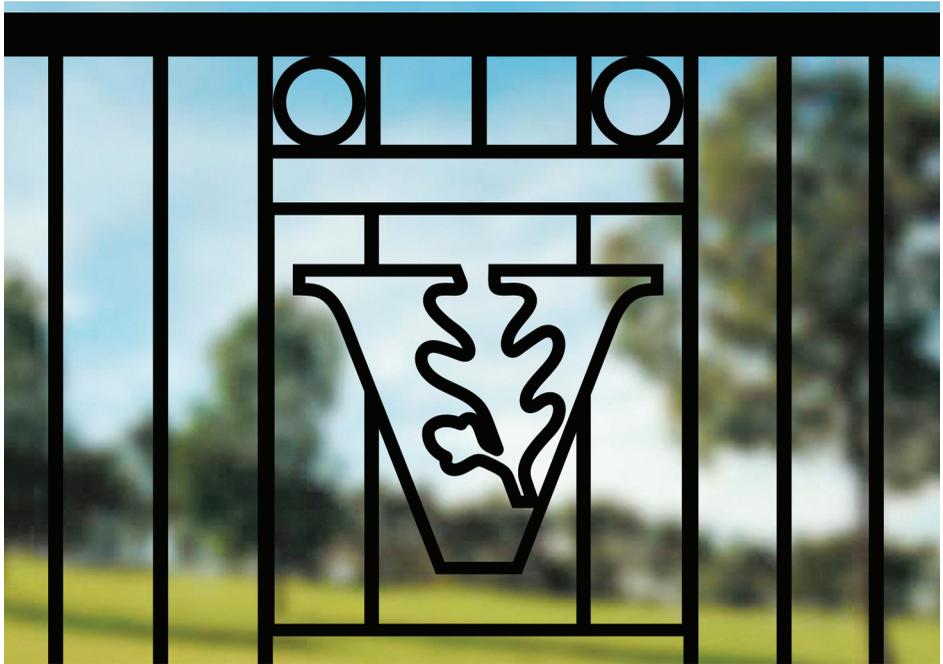
“The toughest person to please in any logo design project should be the designer who creates the mark,” said Malcolm Gear. “It’s challenging because the work must be memorable, as timeless as possible. I never want to be in vogue. I want to set the standard and not follow others.”

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**Vanderbilt  
University**

By Malcolm Gear  
Designers

2002



## Aim for distinction

A distinctive logo is one that can be easily separated from the competition. It has a unique quality or style that accurately portrays your client's business perspective. But how do you create a logo that's unique?

The best strategy is to focus initially on a design that is recognizable. So recognizable, in fact, that just its shape or outline gives it away. Working in only black and white can help you create more distinctive marks, since the contrast emphasizes the shape or idea. Color really is secondary to the shape and form of your design.

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### NMA

By SomeOne

Design and  
creative direction:  
David Law

2003



**NMM**  
NEWSPAPER  
MARKETING  
AGENCY

SomeOne, a London-based design agency specializing in the launch and relaunch of brands, worked with the Newspaper Marketing Agency (NMA) to create two distinctive logos. The first, a monogram using the characters NMA, looks like it was fairly simple to create: mainly just a series of three

sets of up and down strokes. Okay, so there's a little more to it—just coming up with the idea is the challenge—but the mark is bold, simple, and relevant. Most of all, it's distinctive and likely something viewers won't forget.

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**ANNAs**

By SomeOne

Design and  
creative direction:  
David Law

2006



AWARDS for NATIONAL  
NEWSPAPER ADVERTISING

The second logo is a stylish “open newspaper” symbol in the shape of the letter A for the Awards for National Newspaper Advertising (or ANNAs). It works very well in black and white. Notice how easy it was for me to describe it? That’s because distinctive marks are almost always simple enough that they can be easily described.

In another example, England-based designer nido cleverly transforms the familiar letters *a* and *e* in “Talkmore,” a wholesaler of mobile phones and mobile phone accessories, into speech marks. This treatment is brilliantly relevant to Talkmore’s business name and industry. Notice how most of the design is created in black and white, with just enough color added to call attention to the clever transformation of letters into speech marks. This is a classic example of how text does not have to be lifeless.

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**talkmore**

By nido

2001



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**New Bedford  
Whaling Museum**

By Malcolm Gear  
Designers

2005



**NEW BEDFORD  
WHALING  
MUSEUM**

## **Commit to memory**

A solid iconic design is one that onlookers will remember after just one quick glance. Think, for instance, of passengers traveling on a bus, looking out the window and noticing a billboard as the bus whizzes past. Or what about pedestrians, looking up just as a branded truck drives by. Quite often, one quick glance is all the time you get to make an impression.

But how do you focus on this one element of iconic design? It sometimes helps to think about the logos that you remember most when you sit down at the drawing table. What is it about them that keeps them ingrained in your memory? It also helps to limit how much time you spend on each sketch idea—try 30 seconds. Otherwise, how can you expect an onlooker to remember it with a quick glance? You want viewers' experience with your client's brand identity to be such that the logo is remembered the instant they see it the next time.

Malcolm Gear Designers worked with the New Bedford Whaling Museum to craft its brand identity. The museum is the largest in America devoted to the history of the American whaling industry at a time when sailing ships dominated merchant trade and whaling. By combining boat sails with the tail fin of a whale, and employing a unique use of negative space, the resulting design reflects the idea of “whaling in the age of sail.”

## Think small

As much as you might want to see your work plastered across billboards, don't forget your design may also need to accommodate smaller, yet necessary, applications, such as zipper pulls and clothing labels. Clients are usually enthusiastic about, and demanding of, an adaptable logo, since it can save them a substantial amount of money on printing costs, brand implementation meetings, potential redesigns, and more.

In creating a versatile design, simplicity is key. Your design should ideally work at a minimum size of around one inch, without loss of detail. The only way to accomplish this is to keep it simple, which will also increase your chances of hitting on a design that is likely to last.

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### Sugoi

By Rethink  
Communications

Creative director:  
Ian Grais /  
Chris Staples

Designer:  
Nancy Wu

2007



Nancy Wu, a designer in Vancouver, British Columbia, came up with this brand identity for Sugoi, a 20-year-old technical cycling apparel company founded in Vancouver. Over the years, the brand had evolved to embrace runners and triathletes, so the company wanted a renewed icon, one with an extra nod toward active lifestyle brands.

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**Sugoi context**

2007



The logo symbolizes a stylized s-shaped figure, striving ahead, communicating the brand's forward momentum and representing core strength emanating from within. Supported by custom typography, this modern icon embodies energy, boldness, technical innovation, and quality.

## Focus on one thing

Iconic designs that stand apart from the crowd have just one feature to help them stand out. That's it. Just one. Not two, three, or four. You want to leave your client with just one thing to remember about your design. As I've touched on already, your client's customers won't spend a lot of time studying the logo. Usually, one quick glance, and they're gone.

In 2008, the brand identity for the French Property Exhibition was in need of a makeover. The exhibition is the largest property event in the United Kingdom for people who are interested in buying homes in France. Executives at *French Property News*, the U.K.-based French-property publication that organizes the event, felt that the original logo was no longer appropriate. It was more reminiscent of a French bistro than a major exhibition event. The angle of the brushstrokes was a distortion of the French tricolor. And the type felt somewhat frivolous.

English-based designer Roy Smith was given the task of redesigning the logo.

"I explored various directions in the form of thumbnail sketches—a vital part of the conceptualization process. The French flag, rooftops, and louvred shutters—very much a French icon," said Smith.

His final concept makes use of the French flag, but focuses on one relevant attribute of property—the open door, welcoming everyone in.

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**French Property  
Exhibition**

By Roy Smith  
Design

2008

The old logo (left)  
and Smith's new  
design (right)



It's French. It's property.

Brilliant.

Roy could have added another mark to the design, perhaps something reminiscent of the Eiffel Tower. After all, everyone would immediately equate a symbol like the Eiffel Tower with France. But then the viewer would have been forced to consider an unnecessary element, which would make the design less memorable.

“The new design is an evolution of the French tricolor. It can be interpreted as open shutters or an open door, subtly welcoming visitors. It also resembles the exhibition panels themselves,” said Smith. “With three lines of type, I decided to use the evenly weighted Avenir regular in caps, to keep it flush with the clean lines of the mark.”

## The seven ingredients in your signature dish

We've talked about the elements that should be part of your iconic designs, and we've looked at a few worthy examples to back them up. How memorable are these elements for you now? Since they're not as easy to remember as a brilliant minimal black-and-white design, it might help to do a quick review:

- **Keep it simple.** The simplest solution is often the most effective. Why? Because a simple logo helps meet most of the other requirements of iconic design.
- **Make it relevant.** Any logo you design must be appropriate for the business it identifies. For example, as much as you might want to use a fun design that makes everyone smile, this approach is not ideal for businesses like the local crematorium.
- **Incorporate tradition.** Trends come and go like the wind. With brand identity, the last thing you want is to invest a significant amount of your time and your client's money in a design direction that looks dated almost overnight.
- **Aim for distinction.** Begin by focusing on a design that is recognizable. So recognizable, in fact, that just its shape or outline gives it away.

- **Commit to memory.** Quite often, one quick glance is all the time you get to make an impression. You want your viewers' experience to be such that your logo is remembered the instant they see it the next time.
- **Think small.** Your design should ideally work at a minimum of around one inch in size without loss of detail so that it can be put to use for many different applications.
- **Focus on one thing.** Incorporate just one feature to help your designs stand out. That's it. Just one. Not two, three, or four.

## **Remember that rules are made to be broken**

By sticking to the rules for creating iconic designs, you stand a greater chance of delivering timeless and enduring logos that leave your clients buzzing. But can you do more? And do you always need to play by the book? Keep in mind that rules are made to be broken. It's up to you to tread new paths and break through the boundaries in your attempts to create designs that are a cut above the rest. Whether your results are successful will obviously be open to question, but you'll learn so much more and so much faster when any potential mistakes are your own, rather than someone else's.

## Part II

# The process of design